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ABSTRACT

An historical examination of literature teaching between the years 1897 and 1940 reveals four interest group positions that played a part in the development of literature teaching as it is known today: humanists, social efficiency educators, developmentalists, and social meliorists. During the early 1900s, those operating from an essentially humanist point of view complained that some English teachers were teaching literature simply as a mental exercise. The humanists favored teaching literature as a contribution to the improvement of the individual and for the passing on of the literary heritage. Partly because the years leading up to the twenties were so fraught with concern for efficiency and partly because of the resistance English teachers were exhibiting toward what they felt was college domination of the high school curriculum, the anthology soon replaced the individual classic as standard classroom fare. By the 1930s, however, many educators were beginning to doubt whether the subject-centered curriculum was serving the needs of students as had once been thought and advocated an approach that centered around strands of experience. This was followed by social meliorism which emphasized democratic values. Then as now, however, the most popular and persistent approach to teaching literature seems to have reflected some mixture of humanist and mental discipline emphases, by which an essentially undefined subject such as English could be made to appear more concrete and useful in the eyes of an ever skeptical public. (HOD)

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CHANGES REAL AND IMAGINED:

A HISTORICAL EXAMINATION OF SECONDARY SCHOOL LITERATURE TEACHING AND TEXTS

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Introduction

Historically, the establishment of the discipline known as English is relatively recent. It did not find its way into the secondary school curriculum until the latter part of the nineteenth century, and was not universally accepted even then. In 1893, however, when Harvard president Charles W. Eliot and his Committee of Ten reviewed secondary school course offerings and made their recommendations for more uniform education (USOE, 1894), they declared that the study of English should be made the equal of any other subject for "disciplinary or developing power" (p. 4). They also stipulated that English should be taught to every student, every year, since its main purpose might be the same as that cited for the study of classical languages, specifically to train the mind (Sizer, 1964).

Despite this justification for the teaching of English, instructors at the turn of the century still felt that they had to gain a reputation for rigor in the eyes of others who were teaching the more established disciplines, and who, as W. M. Payne noted in 1895, regarded English at times as nothing more than "chatter about Shelley" (p. 26). As a result, in an effort to quickly establish some reputation for their subject English teachers began to take up a practice commonly

employed by teachers of the Latin and Greek classics: that is, the minute analysis and detailed study of the same established body of works year after year.

From these beginnings, then, English entered the high school curriculum in the latter 1800's as a subject students might have the option of studying in lieu of Latin or Greek, primarily to provide exercise for the mind. For the next half century, however, as the school's role in society began to change, English as a school subject began to change too--in some real though subtle ways, but never as dramatically as some curriculum reformers were prone to imagine. The impetus for such change, whether real or imagined, was provided to some extent by the activities of major curriculum reform interest groups which had emerged by the turn of the century. As Kliebard (1982) has stated, the humanist, social efficiency, developmentalist, and social meliorist positions were each in evidence by this time, and therefore, presented the major reform alternatives from which to choose. Then as now, however, the most popular and persistent approach to teaching literature seems to have reflected some mixture of humanist and mental discipline emphases, by which an essentially undefined subject such as English could be made to appear more concrete and "useful" in the eyes of an ever skeptical public.

Humanists and Mental Disciplinarians: The Founders of a Tradition

During the early 1900's, Samuel Thurber, operating from an essentially humanist point of view, complained that some teachers of English were teaching literature simply as a mental gymnastic, and in so doing were adopting the same approach conventionally used for teaching Latin and Greek literature. Although Thurber, who had served as the chairman of the Committee of Ten's Conference on English Studies, had argued in the report he filed for that group that English could serve as a mental discipline, he soon afterward began to express the concern that some educators had gone entirely too far in that direction. Many of them, as he saw it, were sacrificing the aesthetic and humanizing values of literature for the "practical" values of mental exercise. Of course, literature could be made to serve both purposes, and while Thurber seems to have viewed the subject as valuable for its humanizing effect, there were evidently some who continued to find it infinitely more important as a kind of medicine to be taken for the strengthening of one's mental constitution. Consider, for example, the statement of one school board committee chairman from Illinois, who in 1912 reacted to the complaint that students were not interested in many of the literary selections they were required to read in school:

> Whether a book is enjoyable or not in the opinion of a pupil...is not an infallible guide in estimating its value even for the student who condemns it. It may have a disciplinary value quite independent of its sensuous appeal...many of us fancy, would be inclined to favor putting it first, instead of last among the selections for study. (McConn, 1912, p. 17).

At the same time, however, other English educators' views of literature teaching coincided more with Thurber's brand of humanism. For example, George Carpenter, Franklin Baker, and Fred Scott in their 1903 English methods book entitled The Teaching of English in the Elementary and Secondary School, cited cultivation of the moral sense as by far the most important reason for studying literature. The works selected for instruction, they believed, should instill ideals of conduct and fill the mind with beautiful thoughts, thus helping to reinforce "morality" and leaving students less vulnerable when faced with "sordid temptations." Precisely whose values literature was supposed to reinforce was not specified, but as was generally the case at this time, the term "values" was interpreted to mean those of the white, middle class segment of the population.

Textbooks of this period often reflected both humanist and mental discipline elements, since these two trends were to some extent reconcilable. While literature could be seen as contributing to the improvement of the individual and the passing on of the literary heritage, it could also be viewed as developing the disciplined

mind, which would in turn add to the enrichment of the soul.

Textbooks published during the early part of this century, however, began to move away from a purely mental discipline approach. Although the majority of these texts were still singly bound masterpieces such as Macbeth, Silas Marner, and The Idylls of the King, they began to contain less in the way of extensive editorial notes, histories, and biographies which students were required to memorize. Anthologies were becoming more readily available by the 1920's and were marketed as the solution to the problem of having to secure several individually bound "classics" for each student in the literature class.

Partly because the years leading up to the twenties were so fraught with concerns for efficiency, and partly due to the resistance English teachers were exhibiting toward what they felt was college domination of the high school curriculum, the anthology soon replaced the individual classic as standard classroom fare. But to discuss that phenomenon further, we should move from the era of the Committee of Ten and its version of humanism to the Hosic Report and its combination of humanism and social efficiency.

Social Efficiency Educators: The Modifiers of a Tradition

The population of students attending secondary school during the decades leading up to the twenties was becoming increasingly diverse in terms of ethnic origin, interests, and plans for the future. As pointed out frequently around this time, only a small percentage of those who attended high school ever planned to go to college. Many, therefore, saw it as imperative that high schools provide an education for all their students, which implied the need for radical changes to occur.

A radical change in the literature curriculum, however, was not apparent in the recommendations of James Fleming Hosic's 1917 Report on the Reorganization of English in Secondary Schools. On the contrary, it struck an uneasy compromise between social efficiency and humanist positions. For example, the report first stated that all literature which does not contain a "natural appeal" for students "should be excluded, no matter how respectable it may be from age or reputation" (p. 64). However, at another point Hosic and his committee expressed the belief that if a classic didn't appeal to a "healthy minded" student, the choice of book wasn't at fault, the teacher was merely "unable to point the way" (p. 65). For students who would go straight from high school into a vocation, the report even suggested popular books "not truly deserving the name of literature," but

these were to be used only as a means of leading those students into true "literature broad in its humanity, and rich and full in its spiritual appeal" (p. 65).

A few years later, between 1922 and 1924, the Scott, Foresman Company began publishing a literature anthology which basically fit the purposes for literature teaching as had been outlined in the Hosic Report. This series' four graded texts were called Literature and Life, and their chief editor was Edwin Greenlaw. The title of this series itself suggests an attempt to bring out the relevance of these books, and as one of their prefaces states, that was just the intention:

> Here, as throughout the series, the editorial matter shows the relationship of literature to the life and interests of the pupil and to his preparation for his career as a citizen. (Greenlaw & Stratton, 1922, p. v)

As in the Hosic Report, there was within this series of anthologies some evidence of a reaction to the arid classicism of the past, while at the same time there was also a clear endorsement of the humanist tradition with which the classics had become associated.

As textbook publishers are generally aware of their market and know what may or may not be likely to sell, it is very possible that the ideas contained within the prefaces to Literature and Life reflected in part an acceptable or "moderate" approach to literature teaching in the early twenties. The series did soon become a major

commercial success (Hutchinson, 1983), and was, in fact, the most widely used in Georgia's public schools up through the time of the first free textbook adoption in 1937 (Johnson, 1939). The fact that the Literature and Life series contained a collection of "masterpieces required for admission to college under the conference plan" (Greenlaw, Elson, & Keck, 1922, p. iii), while at the same time relating literature to life, was perhaps what guaranteed the series' enormous popularity.

By using this set of anthologies, the editors claimed that teachers would be afforded the advantages of economy, careful gradation, and organization. They also pointed out that over-annotation had been avoided and that the notes included in these texts had not been designed to show "editorial erudition," but rather to enable the pupil to come to a complete understanding of his or her reading without interrupting that reading a moment longer than necessary. Here then was a distinct departure from the old practice of parsing and analyzing each word in a selection if indeed the teacher did use this text as the editors suggested it was to be used.

The Developmentalists: Challengers of a Tradition

By the 1930's, however, many educators were beginning to doubt whether the subject-centered curriculum they had been following was serving the needs of students as had

once been thought. Inspired in part by John Dewey's influence, English teachers began to ask such questions as "what are we doing in our literature classes, how are we motivating the students, and what selections can we find to interest them more?" Among the most widely known of the English educators to consider questions such as these was Dora V. Smith from the University of Minnesota. Smith was selected by the National Council of Teachers of English to conduct a survey of what was actually being taught in English classes throughout the nation. During the course of this survey she was able to visit in various classrooms around the country in order to find out something about what was going on in English instruction at that time. To her amazement, she discovered that in very few literature classes was any consideration being given to the interests of the students -- to making literature enjoyable or relevant for them in their daily lives. She also noted in her official report, Instruction in English (USOE, 1932), that very little contemporary literature of any sort was being taught in the schools. The same lists of classics which had been taught at the turn of the century were still very much in evidence, and in spite of the few differences which she observed in the specific cases of some atypical schools, not much had changed in literature teaching for more than a quarter of a century.

Following Smith's report, the National Council of Teachers of English came out with the report of its Curriculum Commission chaired by W. Wilbur Hatfield. An Experience Curriculum in English (NCTE, 1935), as Hatfield's commission entitled its report, had been in the making for almost six years and was said to be the outgrowth of requests from English teachers for better curriculum materials. This report advocated that English work be organized around "strands of experience," and that the work in literature be centered around nine of these: (1) enjoying action, (2) exploring the physical world, (3) exploring the social world, (4) studying human nature, (5) sharing lyric emotion, (6) giving fancy rein, (7) solving puzzles, (8) listening to radio broadcasts, and (9) enjoying photoplays (Stahl, 1965). Certainly the major thrust of the Experience Curriculum was intended to be in line with developmentalist ideas, but within this curriculum there was still room for humanist principles to operate.

The move for reform in the teaching of English continued from within, and by 1936 there was still another National Council of Teachers of English publication entitled A Correlated Curriculum. This monograph was the result of the work of a committee chaired by Ruth Mary Weeks, and basically called on English teachers to broaden their plans by drawing upon all subject matter--even Greek

and Latin--to deal with the student as a dynamic whole in the midst of genuine living, posing problems of immediate significance and devising and using means for their solution (Evans and Walker, 1966). Some of the procedures advocated by this report were doubtless controversial, but many teachers seem to have realized the limitations of conventional methods and attempted various experiments in correlation simply out of faith that better ways could be found to teach literature. Though correlation may have ultimately resulted in very little "improvement," it did establish thematic organization of literary selections which has remained a popular approach to literature teaching even up through the present day.

Still carrying on the campaign to center literature instruction developmentally around the students and their needs, Dora V. Smith in her 1936 presidential address to the National Council of Teachers of English, spoke in favor of employing transition novels, or young adult novels, to bridge the developmental gap which occurs for most students around the ninth and tenth grades when they are still too inexperienced to appreciate Silas Marner, but can readily enjoy a fast-moving adventure such as Tarzan of the Apes. As Smith expressed it, "I would argue only for a sane bridging of the gap, for the filling of our courses of study during the ninth and tenth grades

with wholesome stories of adventure and far-distant lands" (1937, p. 99).

Another crusader for an essentially developmentalist approach to literature was Louise Rosenblatt, who in 1938 published her farsighted Literature as Exploration. In this book "she spoke directly and honestly to teachers with an understanding that went to the very core of literature instruction -- whether it was organized by types, experience, theme, or any other method" (Evans and Walker, p. 6, 1966). The following is just such an example of her insight:

> No matter what the form -- poem, novel, drama, biography, essay -- literature makes alive and comprehensible to us the myriad ways in which human beings meet the infinite possibilities that life offers. And always in books, we seek some close contact with a mind uttering its sense of life. (pp. 6-7)

Rosenblatt's fundamental concern was that literature be relevant to the reader and that the selections chosen by the teacher for the student not exceed their developmental reach. She pointed out that simply reading a classic for its own sake may do little for a student who is too young to "feel in any personal way the problems or conflicts treated....[since] difficulties in understanding...are usually not a matter of words and syntax, for words must be apprehended in some context of experience" (p. 256).

At the same time Rosenblatt's work was beginning to receive notice, the National Council of Teachers of

English made another attempt at encouraging teachers of English to adopt an experience-based, developmental approach to teaching literature. Their 1939 publication of Conducting Experiences in English was a practical collection of "things to do" with the Experience Curriculum, and was the result of a four-year compilation of actual attempts by classroom teachers to incorporate "experience" in their teaching of English. Approaches suggested by this report ranged from the traditional to the progressive, as teachers in their own individual ways attempted to adjust to the idea that literature should be considered the written expression of man's ideas and emotions in relation to life experiences.

Still, despite these varied attempts to reform literature teaching along developmentalist lines, by the end of the thirties the actual content of literature programs had changed very little (Stahl, 1965). The developmentalists had made a strong effort to challenge the traditional humanist approach to literature, but had not really succeeded in doing much more than producing more new policies and curricula to be discarded. That many literature teachers still held fundamentally humanist views may be seen in the marketing approach which Scott, Foresman and Company took when distributing their new Literature and Life series, after it had undergone some revision for the decade of the thirties. The following

passage is taken from a letter Scott, Foresman's representative in Atlanta sent to a University of South Carolina professor during 1935 (ostensibly in an effort to have him use their texts with his student teachers), and suggests that at least one of the bases upon which the texts were being marketed at that time remained the appeal of their solid core of classics, incidentally related to life:

> The fundamental plan of the new Book I is the same as that of the other volumes of the Literature and Life Series. It provides a year's literature work in one volume, including a core of long classics to meet standard requirements. And like the other books, its organization is designed to bring out the relationship of literature to life. (Kilgore, 1935)

A brochure enclosed with this letter and entitled simply "Study Plan," proved to be a listing of all the works in Book I, revised (1933), and Book I, original (1922). The opening statement in this leaflet reveals that the revised edition was very close to the original because it was "the aim of the authors [to] make it possible to use the two editions in the same class. It was felt that this would make it unnecessary for schools not ready to install the new edition completely to purchase fill-in copies of the 1922 edition when an improved 1933 product was available" (n.d., n.p.). Whether or not teachers "bought" this reasoning is uncertain, but there does seems to have been a continuation of the appeal of the "classical

core," and shrewd publishers would have been likely to realize this even during the decade of developmentalist influence.

Social Meliorism: The Underlying Tradition

Even though meliorism was never a primary concern of any of the interest groups which attempted to influence the teaching of English during the time period under consideration, it nevertheless seems to have been an unstated goal of them all. The humanists, the social efficiency educators, and the developmentalists had in mind different ways of achieving the "best" education possible, and in the area of literature teaching especially, they all saw their reforms as eventually leading toward an "improved" society. What "improved" meant to each reform group may have differed, in that not all viewed the same goals as important, but on the whole they saw English teaching as a means toward their desired ends.

One of the individuals to express a strong belief in the democratic values of English was Walter Barnes of Fairmont State Normal School in West Virginia, who in 1923 produced a book entitled The New Democracy in the Teaching of English. This work was a collection of three addresses which Barnes had delivered between 1918 and 1920, and was admittedly controversial. In

the book Barnes discusses democracy at length and then proceeds to treat it in relation to each area of English. Of literature and democracy he has the following to say:

> I believe it [literature] is more democratic than language and composition, and that it is yearly becoming more conscious of the desires and demands of the majority of average persons who constitute the student body. But we must further and more fully democratize it. (p. 5)
>
> .....
>
> We must democritize literature, not by making it aridly utilitarian, but [rather] by selecting the kind of literature that will have the widest appeal among all classes....Literature teaching is genuinely democratic when it makes its contribution of culture to all. (p. 6)

Barnes certainly saw the "democratic" teaching of English, and particularly literature, as the best way to improve the lot of all people in society. His thoughts on this matter, however, were evidently either ignored or overlooked by many English teachers, because there was no direct attempt to incorporate them in any of the major curriculum documents put out by the National Council of Teachers of English between the early twenties and the late thirties. Still, even though Barnes is not credited with having provided the inspiration, there are points within the various documents which share much in common with his ideas. The Experience Curriculum, for example, was concerned with teaching literature that would have

wide appeal, but whether this recommendation won acceptance at the time is doubtful.

While the social meliorist position was important to reform in the area of English teaching in general, the improvement of society through education was not often cited as a concern. Perhaps because such a position might have appeared too radical for some, and perhaps because there were other more immediate concerns being voiced in the area of literature teaching, social meliorism was able to exist only as an underlying element of other more acceptable attempts at reform.

Conclusion

If we regard curriculum history as "the scholarly attempt to chronicle, interpret, and ultimately understand the processes whereby social groups over time select, organize, and distribute knowledge and belief through educational institutions" (Kliebard and Franklin, 1983, p. 138), then this historical examination of literature teaching between the years of 1897 and 1940 may be a step in that direction. Each of the four interest group positions played a part in the development of literature teaching as we have come to know it today; the question remains as to whether the changes we perceive are real or imagined.

First, there can be no drastic changes in literature teaching claimed for the period between 1897 and 1940. As Roderick Botts (1970) has said, during this period there was little more than an illusion of progress in the area of English, primarily due to the conflicting ideas and opinions of those in positions of power within the National Council of Teachers of English. Botts holds that for this reason many of the curriculum documents coming out of that organization never really expressed any true reformist ideals, and therefore, for many years what were proported to be complete reworkings of the curriculum were little more than some redressing of the old in new garments.

Second, though the period of the fifties and sixties lies outside the scope of this examination, I am inclined to believe that some of the reforms proposed during the earlier part of this century finally began to be incorporated into the English curriculum in the form of "life adjustment" concerns, which stemmed from attempts to help students cope with their environment, but eventually went too far for most. While the idea behind helping students "adjust" may have been worthwhile, many of the techniques were not widely accepted by the majority as in keeping with what English courses ought to accomplish. Bibliotherapy, for example, which involved the selection of specific books for individual students according to

their particular problems, was one technique which failed to satisfy many who felt it was the responsibility of the literature teacher to "inspire" rather than counsel. Therefore, after Sputnik there was an immediate swing back in the opposite direction with Project English Centers being funded by the government to strengthen and reestablish "sound" principles in the teaching of English. With the meeting of the British and the American English educators at Dartmouth in 1966 (Dixon, 1966), the student-centered approach to literature seemed to resurface for a moment, but was soon submerged again by cries of "back to basics" around the mid-seventies.

We find ourselves now, where literature teaching is concerned, in a position similar to that of English teachers over fifty years ago. We seem to be asked by the public to teach literature as the social efficiency educators would have it taught, for the purpose of developing better citizens, but at the same time we are pressured to teach it as the humanists would, to inculcate the basic moral values and ideals which the community holds dear. Very few if any of our constituents are asking that we teach literature from a developmentalist's point of view, although the more scholarly members of our profession still advocate such methods as the most desirable. Underlying the various interest group positions we still find suggestions of social meliorism. Now, just

as during the early years of this century, our society is in a state of rapid change, and whatever we do to educate our young people should, it is felt, also lead to improvement of the lives they will lead in the future.

We seem to be discovering in the case of literature teaching today that although many of the trappings have become more "modern," we are still faced with the problem of "persistent instruction" (Cuban, 1982). The rhetoric may have changed over the years, the internal and external reformers may have operated better in conjunction with one another, the textbook companies may have issued new editions of books which are said to conform to more "up-dated" specifications, but in the final analysis we are still teaching many of the same "classics" without bothering to consider why. Perhaps given an examination of a piece of curriculum history such as this, however, educators of today may gain the perspective they need to either continue teaching what they teach because it is based upon a sound rationale, or to stop and reevaluate. The question still remains: Are we teaching what we teach because we know it to be the "best," or have we simply fallen victim to outmoded traditions?

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